

Online Task-based English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Education

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1. Introduction

The use of technology-mediated task-based language education (TBLT) online is now more than ever imperative as the sudden disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has unpredictably redefined the educational institutions' approaches and methodologies. Online language education has become a reality for many foreign language programs that have been precipitously compelled to remote teaching. Therefore, as language classrooms are now being redefined, further knowledge of how to set learners up to do online task-based studies to achieve their language learning goals must be part of teachers' professional development. There are multiple academic resources written on tasks, technology, task-based language courses online, and the availability of multimedia input resources like YouTube videos, Netflix movies, newscasts, and podcasts and free online reading materials. Still, there remains few, if none, methodological guidelines for how to do TBLT online that promotes productive language output, scaffolds the kind of interaction that facilitates and motivates language learning, and gives feedback, which are crucial to develop foreign language skills (Gass, 1997; Long, 1981; Swain, 1995; Swain and Watanabe, 2013). This article will do a literature review of Task-based Language Teaching (TLBT) principles and give two examples of lesson plans that demonstrate the Willis (1996, 2012) task-based methodology framework for synchronous and video-based online teaching and learning.

2. Literature Review

Task-based language teaching is a pedagogical framework for the concept and instructions of second or foreign languages. Since the 1980s, task-based language education (TBLT) has maintained a dominant role in linguistic pedagogical practice. TBLT is a teaching and learning process with tasks that fosters functionality in the language rather than isolated grammar forms. Willis and Willis (2007, p. 1) (as cited in Bava Harji and Anchian, 2017) asserted that “...the most effective way to teach a language is by engaging learners in real language use in the classroom. This is done by designing tasks-discussions, problems, games, and so on, which require learners to use the language for themselves” (p. 25). As stated by Bava Harji and Anchian (2017), “Robinson (2001, 2003, 2005) claimed that when EFL learners engage in carrying out a task, attention to different aspects of the task potentially enables them to enhance performance in all three areas of language production, namely, accuracy, fluency, and complexity” (p. 26). It is further asserted by Bava Harji et al (2017) that “Robinson maintained that the increased cognitive demands of the task generate more interaction, more attention to form, and more intake of information from the input” (p. 26).

Nunan (1989, p. 10) (as cited by Bava Harji et al., 2017) defined academically constructed task as “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form” (p. 25). Ellis (2003, p. 16) (as cited in Bava Harji et al, 2017) emphasized the same by stating that “like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes” (p. 25). Activities in TBLT classrooms must demonstrate a focus on meaning, make the learners do an activity to fill in a gap to complete the task, require learners to rely on their linguistic resources to complete the task, and exhibit specific learning outcomes (Ellis, 2009b).

The activities in TBLT intend to make students utilize language that either directly or indirectly bears a resemblance to the language used in a real-life situation (Ellis, 2003, p. 16). Thus, in TBLT classrooms the students use

authentic or true-to-life language to complete tasks that portray situations in the real-world. Samuda (2001) stated that task-based methodology requires that teachers design and implement tasks that set learners up to perform learning tasks meaningful both in their academic and outside the classroom undertakings. Accordingly, as asseverated by Baralt and Gomez (2017), “TBLT means teaching with, learning with and assessing with tasks to promote learning of a functional language” (p. 29). Baralt et al (2017) further noted that “Long (2015) described in detail that a fully task-based course must first begin with a needs analysis in order to identify learners’ authentic needs with the language” (p. 29). As in many language education pedagogies, TBLT seeks to integrate all four language skills; but, more so to move from fluency to fluency with accuracy. In her e-book “A Framework for Task-based Learning,” Willis (2012) has presented the task-based pedagogical framework that takes account of the need for authentic communication in a second and foreign language classroom.

There are three task-based approach models developed by Ellis (2003), Nunan (2004), and Willis (1996, 2012) (Baralt et al., 2017). Each differs in scope; nevertheless, all recommend that teachers explore different methodological alternatives in the course of task execution and completion to maximize the learner’s experiences (Baralt et al., 2017). Therefore, in the task-based pedagogical method, the teacher designs multiple tasks. As stated by Baralt et al. (2017, p. 32), “task-based methodology encompasses all of the types of psycholinguistically-supported activities that the teacher does around a task to maximize learners’ performance of that tasks.” The example lesson plans in this article will demonstrate how the task-based methodology framework of Willis (1996, 2012), as seen below in Figure 1, has been adapted for a synchronous and video-based online teaching and learning.

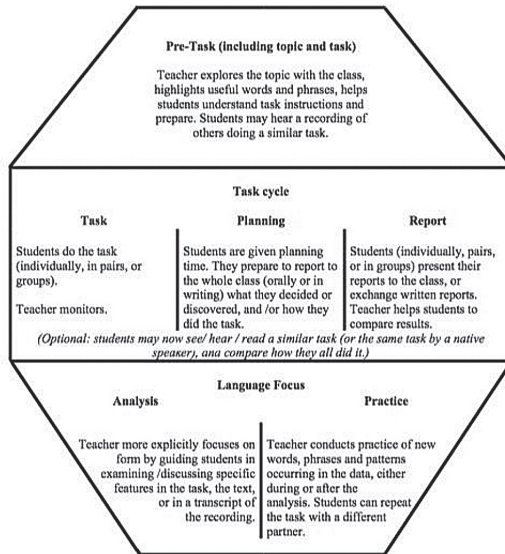


Figure 1. Task-based Learning Framework (Willis 1996, 2012) (as cited and reprinted with permission from Jane Willis in Baralt and Gomez, 2017, p. 31).

Willis' (1996, 2012) TLBT framework is typically based on three stages, as shown in Figure 1 above. The first is the pre-task, during which the teacher activates the learners' prior schemata while introducing a topic. The activities engage the learners in recalling words and phrases and learning new sets of terminologies essential to the current tasks and culminating report stage of the lesson. Afterward, the teacher shifts to the next stage, which Willis calls "the task cycle" that comprises the task itself, the planning time, and the reporting time. In the task cycle stage, the students work individually, in pairs and in small groups while the teacher monitors. The students then prepare a report about the task during which the teacher provides language support. The students do a presentation of their findings in the reporting time. The final stage in the TBLT framework of Willis (1996, 2012) is the language focus stage that comprises analysis and practice (Willis 1996, 2012). In the analysis, the teacher highlights and works with students on specific language

forms from the task. During the practice, Willis (1996, 2012) (as cited in Baralt et al., 2017) emphasized that “the teacher leads students in practicing forms reviewed during the analysis” (p. 31).

As the readers can see, there are a range of tasks available and utilized in TBLT which should provide more motivating activities and functional language learning for the students. The next part of this article will provide a task-based lesson plans utilized in an EFL listening and speaking class that demonstrates how Willis’s task-based methodology framework (1996, 2012) has been adapted for asynchronous and video-based online teaching and learning.

3. Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) Online

An online task-based methodology is not the same way as face-to-face classrooms. Preparation prior to either online synchronous or on-demand TBLT class is essential. Below is the example of the TBLT methodology used for an online EFL listening and speaking class. The instructions and learning activities were executed for three consecutive classes. The culminating activity of this lesson is to make the students simulate and video-record a situation of a traveler at the airport.

Oral Communication Course (2nd year students from different non-English major faculties)

Day 1 Introduction of the topic (*synchronous/live stream lecture, 90-minute class*)

Objective:

- (1) Learn compound nouns about air travel
- (2) Use the same vocabulary to complete sentences related to air travel
- (3) Listen and identify the use of the same compound nouns in an authentic air travel situation.
- (4) Read and answer questions about solo travels.

Materials:

- (1) Travel lessons in their assigned textbook

(2) Video-recorded tasks instructions uploaded at each step of the lesson

Procedures:

Step 1

Task: Identify the meaning of and use in sentences the compound nouns about air travel.

1. Students make appropriate combination of words to form compound nouns about air travel.
2. Students match each compound noun with the picture it describes.
3. Students use the compound words to complete the sentences about air travel.
4. The teacher gives the students the signal when to move to their pre-assigned private channel on MS Teams.

The students work by themselves at first. The instructions at this stage are video recorded. The students are guided about the time they need to complete each task. After the time allotted to complete this task, they go to their pre-assigned channel in the online learning platform (MS Teams) this course is utilizing and start a video meeting to check answers with groupmates.

Step 2

Task: Listen to an authentic air travel conversation to reinforce the use and comprehension of the vocabulary in Task 1 and learn new nouns (country and city names) and related travel jargons.

1. Listening for gist: students will listen to and understand the general idea of the conversation between two persons on a travel.
2. Listening for details: students will organize the information from a spoken text to be able to explain it.
3. Listening to infer information: students will infer information by answering questions about what is meant by the speakers in the listening text, how it is said, and to whom the statements are addressed.

The students are now in their assigned private channel on MS Teams. First, they will listen to the video recorded conversation uploaded on their channel by themselves to complete all the listening tasks. Take note that this new video recorded material also includes instructions on how the students should work on the tasks. Then, they will start a video meeting again to check

answers with groupmates. These answers are validated by the teacher.

In many cases, the students can correctly answer the tasks. Nevertheless, in TBLT methodology, teachers need to conduct investigation of the answers for confirmation and for any corrections or clarifications on forms and comprehension.

Step 3

Task: Read a short authentic article about traveling alone to further reinforce the main topic of these lessons which is traveling by air.

1. Read for details: students will read the article to find out the points that relate to solo travel.
2. Scan for details: students will give supporting details to the points they have identified in number 1.
3. Group discussion: students will choose a type of solo vacation from the textbook. As a group, they will gather information about their choice. They will prepare to share these ideas in the next live online class. Students will complete this task as a group homework.

Day 2 Presentation of the information students have gathered in Day 1
(*synchronous/live stream lecture, 90-minute class*)

Objectives:

- (1) Students presents the information they have gathered about a type of solo vacation.
- (2) Students demonstrates use of the vocabulary about air travel they learned on Day 1.
- (3) Commence preparation for the video-recorded simulation of a travel at the airport.

Materials:

- (1) Travel lessons in their assigned textbook
- (2) Language use at the airport and on an airplane

Procedures:

Step 1

Task: Presentation about a type of solo vacation

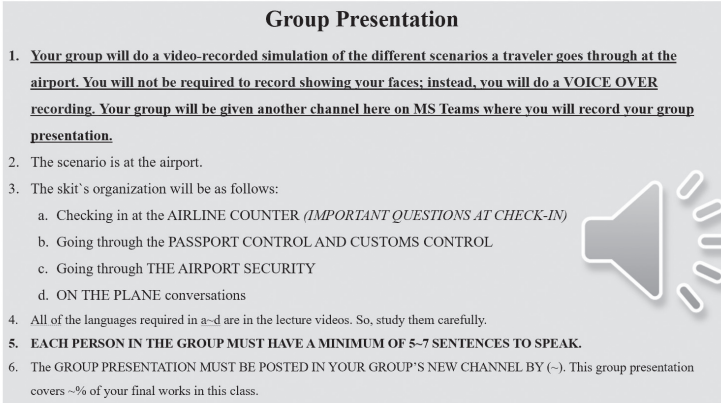
1. Students in groups will take turn to do a live (real-time) presentation of the information they have gathered about a type of solo travel with a three-slide MS PowerPoint material.
2. Students receive feedback on their performance which includes analysis of the language used.

Step 2

Task: Preparation for the culminating activity of this three-class lesson plan

1. Students listen to a recording of different scenarios that depict the use of language related to travels at the airport and on an airplane.
2. Students receive a video-recorded instructions about the video-recorded simulation of a travel at the airport and on an airplane.

On Day 2, the students both work with the whole class and in their assigned group. The students use the last 50 minutes of the class in their assigned private channel to prepare for the video-recorded simulation of a travel by air. Figure 2 shows the exact instructions students receive to accomplish the task.



The image is a screenshot of a presentation slide titled "Group Presentation". It contains a list of instructions for a video-recorded simulation of an airport scenario. The instructions are numbered 1 through 6. Instruction 1 is underlined and bolded. Instruction 5 is also bolded. To the right of the list is a large speaker icon with sound waves, indicating audio content. The slide has a light gray background with a darker gray border.

Group Presentation

1. **Your group will do a video-recorded simulation of the different scenarios a traveler goes through at the airport. You will not be required to record showing your faces; instead, you will do a VOICE OVER recording. Your group will be given another channel here on MS Teams where you will record your group presentation.**
2. The scenario is at the airport.
3. The skit's organization will be as follows:
 - a. Checking in at the AIRLINE COUNTER (*IMPORTANT QUESTIONS AT CHECK-IN*)
 - b. Going through the PASSPORT CONTROL AND CUSTOMS CONTROL
 - c. Going through THE AIRPORT SECURITY
 - d. ON THE PLANE conversations
4. All of the languages required in a-d are in the lecture videos. So, study them carefully.
5. **EACH PERSON IN THE GROUP MUST HAVE A MINIMUM OF 5-7 SENTENCES TO SPEAK.**
6. The GROUP PRESENTATION MUST BE POSTED IN YOUR GROUP'S NEW CHANNEL BY (~). This group presentation covers ~% of your final works in this class.

Figure 2. Copy of the video-recorded instructions for an airport scenario simulation project in an EFL classroom.

Day 3 Postings of the video-recorded simulation of scenarios when traveling by air (*synchronous/live stream lecture, 90-minute class*)

Objectives:

- (1) Students presents a video-recorded skit about traveling by air.
- (2) Students demonstrate the use of the language appropriate in air travel scenarios.

Procedures:

1. Students upload the project on the MS Teams' channel created for submissions.
2. Students watch each group's video-recorded projects.
3. Students rate each groups' project based on clarity of speech, authentic language use and creativity.
4. Students make a peer-evaluation report using the rubric on MS Forms created for each group.
5. Students are given five days to watch all the projects submitted and post the peer-evaluation form.

4. The Challenges of Online TLBT

As in other teaching methodologies, TBLT comes across challenges that may include weak internet connections, technology-fatigue, weak social interactions among students, and not enough time on the teacher's part to prompt evaluations of students' works and timely preparation of the learning materials. Based on the writer's experience, there are some not-so-complicated ways to avoid as much as possible these challenges. First, it is essential to ensure a good and stable internet connection to facilitate smooth communications, particularly during real-time classes. Next, it is important that teachers are aware that teaching online requires the ability to multi-task. This may include students suddenly sending private messages in the chatroom asking for technical assistance to complete a task while on another channel providing language support for another group of students. Some students quickly get anxious that a non-immediate response to an email or chat message makes them send a hundred more queries of the same topic! Teachers must keep in mind that to feel worn out because of such tedious situations is part of an online learning and teaching environment. Therefore,

it is necessary to plan ahead of time, not feel rushed to see the completion of the tasks, and take a break as soon as the situation calls for it. A strong social interaction among students may also be encouraged by assigning them to the same group for some time instead of reshuffling them in another group. Then, choose topics for task-based activities that are pertinent and meaningful to the students' lives. As asserted by Baralt et al. (2017), "learners' having to do a real task that is pertinent to their lives and local contexts, and then listening and sharing about each other's perspectives, facilitates a sense of community" (p. 40).

5. Conclusion

This paper aims to share a set of teaching pedagogies for language task-based online activities. The literature review showed that task-based methodology enhances EFL learners' language production. The example lesson plans have also shown how to adapt Willis (1996, 2012) TBLT pedagogical framework for online language education. The challenges that online TBLT may face have also been discussed with suggestions on how they can be addressed.

Adapting an online TBLT pedagogy through synchronous and video-based instructions requires in-depth preparation when it is the first time for the teacher to utilize it. Once the methodologies have been established, the plans can easily be re-designed according to the learning needs. Students who are used to the traditional way of foreign language education may be hesitant initially. Still, a step by step guidance and concrete examples of the expected outcomes usually address this concern.

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